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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews recent trends toward increasing emphasis on excellence in American business and applies these trends to school reform and restructuring in the context of gifted education. First, it notes the main ideas of recent business and education excellence studies which call for radical changes in the American education system. Examined is the dilemma of balancing the educational demands of equity and excellence especially in an age of major demographic shifts. A quality-oriented paradigm is proposed which merges equity and excellence and focuses on the individual thus replacing the industrial model paradigm which focused on the "system". The issue of ability grouping is considered and research supporting within class grouping is cited. Concepts underlying the middle school approach are noted as another example where the equity/excellence dilemma and grouping concerns emerge. "Equifinality" is offered as a concept which suggests many potential ways to reach resolution especially when the focus is always on the individual gifted learner and the teacher/facilitator. (18 references) (DB)

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School Reform and Restructuring: Relationship to Gifted Education

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Introduction

As American society turns its vision toward the future, it is with an entirely different perspective from that which was anticipated for the second half of the 20th Century. Post World War II America saw limitless horizons for itself while the rest of the world looked to the United States as the model to meet and to ultimately surpass.

Now a different set of realities has appeared. America's leadership position in many areas is seriously challenged. Although the launching of Sputnik in 1957 led to a short-term national focus on science, mathematics, and technology, the nation became most aware of the leveling of its international position during the seventies. From Vietnam to Watergate to OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) to "Corporate Japan," America's belief in itself has been severely shaken.

The trust and confidence formerly placed in America's leaders have given way to distrust with increased questioning, resulting in demands to reestablish this nation's past superiority. Today, American business and governmental leaders are demanding that education develop the technologically literate workers necessary to regain international preeminence. Since *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), education in the United States has been found to inadequately prepare the "human capital" necessary for tomorrow.

Restoring Superiority Through Education

How then, given the current environment, can America regain the strong international position its people expect? Increasingly, the answer is said to lie in an educational process that is significantly different from current practice. In *Winning the Brain Race,* David Kearns and Dennis Doyle (1988) spoke of American business as falling behind foreign competition that is better organized. They provided a vision of the type of employee necessary for today's world: "The modern employee must be more highly educated, better informed, more flexible than ever before" (Kearns & Doyle, 1988, p. 9).

Kearns and Doyle further pointed out that successful companies have discarded archaic, outmoded, and thoroughly discredited practices that are still in place in most school districts which are "organized like a factory of the late 19th century ... a system designed to stifle creativity and independent judgment" (Kearns & Doyle, 1988, p. 9). They also stated that educational excellence is undoubtedly our most serious national problem. The seriousness of the authors' assertion on excellence was evident as they compared education to Kearns' company, Xerox, which had to "... change or die" (Kearns & Doyle, 1988, p. 11).

Good organizational practices were also exposed in *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and *A Passion for Excellence* (Peters & Austin, 1985). *In Search of Excellence* called for a commitment to the development of innovative people, with a need for such people throughout organizations, all persisting in the pursuit of innovation. *A Passion for Excellence* made a strong case for a revolution in leadership, where the manager is the leader who champions innovation. Peters and Austin stated that to sustain

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superior performances, innovation is required. Business studies of excellence focus on people and innovation; excellent businesses are built on innovative people who embrace change.

Alvin Toffler (1970) looked into the future and made interesting predictions. He identified most of the issues addressed in the business excellence reports in his book *Future Shock.* Toffler spoke about education's future objective being to significantly increase the coping skills of the individual: "It is no longer sufficient for Johnny to understand the past.... (He) must ... learn to anticipate the directions and rate of change (of the future) and so must Johnny's teachers" (Toffler, 1970, p. 346).

Toffler's views complemented the business excellence studies addressed in *Re-inventing the Corporation,* which stated, "Today's ill-prepared graduates become tomorrow's corporate burden.... But most important, as we approach the seller's market, a shrinking labor pool of entry-level workers will bring companies face-to-face with the prospect of hiring graduates who are even more poorly qualified. This represents a far-reaching threat to the promise of prosperity in the new information society" (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985, p. 170).

Further threats extend to national security as former Secretary of Defense Carlucci, in *America's Next Crisis* (The Aerospace Education Foundation [TAEF], 1989), called for the education community to correct, with industry's help, our national technical illiteracy because of its threat to national defense.

The business excellence studies and the future-oriented reports provided some of the reasons for an increasing concern about education. *A Nation at Risk* clearly pointed out the threat of an educational system that is failing to meet the nation's needs. In *America's Next Crisis,* which focused on the inexorable and pervasive nature of the risk, education is viewed as the keystone of our nation, as the primary system for developing our nation's human capital. Yet, this study addressed a consistent weakness in higher-order thinking skills across all subjects on national educational assessments. Other studies following *A Nation at Risk* raised even further questions about the limits of today's educational system.

Significantly adding to America's dilemma are the demographics cited in *A Vision for America's Future* (Children's Defense Fund [CDF], 1989). This work pointed out that by the year 2030, one third, or 25 million of America's children, will be poor; this is nearly twice the number of poor children today. In addition, by the year 2030, minority children will constitute 41% of the child population.

To overcome these identified trends toward an increased "at-risk" population, *A Vision for America's Future* called for setting clear national, state, city, community, and personal goals for child survival and development, and investing whatever leadership, commitment, time, money, and sustained effort are needed to achieve them. It further stated, "The cost of repairing our crumbling national foundation will be expensive in leadership, effort, time, and money. The cost of not repairing it, or patching cosmetically, may be fatal" (CDF, 1989, p. xviii).

Together, the diverse views referenced earlier point to a critical need for developing a shared vision for schools. A critical role of government is to support the development of a shared vision and to provide the "driving, powerful objective analogous to putting a man on the moon," demanded by former Maryland State Superintendent David Hornbeck in *School Reforms: A Status Report* (Research for Better Schools, 1989, p. 1).

Serving the Gifted and Nongifted

In meeting our nation's present and future needs, all of our gifted and talented students must be identified and developed. *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century* (Johnson & Packer, 1989), a Hudson Institute Study, and *A Vision For America's Future* showed that these students will increasingly be economically disadvantaged with limited English proficiency, while at the same time they will decreasingly be white males. Adding to the seriousness of the situation is the fact that our national labor pool will shrink as the work force grows at its lowest rate since the 1930s. The fundamental need to identify the currently underrepresented able student is addressed by Harry Campbell, a senior assistant technologist at TRW, Inc., in *America's Next Crisis:* "One of our concerns in a high-tech industry is that there are kids out there who have the talents but who are getting lost in the system" (TAEF, 1989, p. 20).

A key question needs to be resolved: How can the wave of school reform and restructuring relationships be utilized for the benefit of meeting the educational needs of all children? As school reform and restructuring emerge as the responses necessary for today's and tomorrow's schools, gifted education leaders have an opportunity to guide school improvement through changes resulting in a total school program responsive to all students' needs.

Equity v. Excellence

At the root of any query about meeting the educational needs of children in the United States is the balancing that must occur between equity and excellence. Because of the limited resources available, as well as historical and legal parameters, separate programs or tracks come under fire as being elitist or even discriminatory. To truly avoid the negative consequences of such perceptions, it is fundamental to resolve the equity v. excellence issue in a positive fashion for all, regardless of perceived abilities. This is truly a situation calling for a win-win or cooperative process.

The resolution of the equity/excellence dilemma requires leadership and guidance to move out of the old paradigm of the industrial or assembly line educational model. This old model defines all students as being the same, like some product moving down the assembly line, receiving parts and processes at predetermined intervals and not really enhancing individual differences. Shifting to a new paradigm, which focuses on quality and encourages creativity and independent judgment, can be accomplished through a redefining of equity and excellence. Under former definitions, these terms were interpreted, for the most part, as being mutually exclusive. However, with a quality-oriented paradigm, equity and excellence can be and, in fact, must be merged.

Equity becomes equality of opportunities afforded the individual student. With this view, the starting point is the individual, with the opportunities provided according to the uniqueness of the individual. Thus, different individuals may not receive exactly the same educational program; instead, they will be given equal opportunities based on their individual needs. *Excellence* fits into this process as the individual's specific educational needs are met and as that individual is enabled to progress as far as his or her abilities and desires will allow.

This paradigmatic shift will take leadership to promote, because acceptance must move from a process focusing on the system to one focusing on the individual. The "systems focus" model of the past plugs individuals into prearranged slots demanding conformity. The "individual focus" model molds the system to the individual while celebrating individual independence and creativity.

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A major concern for educators of the gifted during these reform efforts is the prospect of being subsumed by general education in the name of systematic reform. The fear is that opportunities will be limited to those needed by the majority. This is a realistic concern about what may appear as a minor deviation from the full "individual focus" model. However, resisting the changing environment and fighting against the winds of change are reactionary. Educators of gifted children must use the same progressive, future-oriented vision expected of their students.

Advocates for the gifted have demonstrated "how the principles and requisites for the gifted and talented programs they espouse can expand the limits of the larger educational program.... Assuming that the goal of education reform is to improve the total education system for the benefit of all students, the development, expansion, and improvement of programs for the gifted are legitimate purposes and we have a responsibility and logical role to play in the realization of this goal" (Seaberg, 1991, p. 1).

Until the shift to the individualized, quality paradigm becomes accepted and clearly displaces the industrial model paradigm, the old equity and excellence definitions will continue to dominate. This definitional dominance will hinder the infusion and codification of gifted and talented education into the total educational program. "By remaining peripheral we have become extremely vulnerable. Gifted programs are being eliminated in schools all over the United States" (Feldhusen, 1991, p. 115).

Ability Grouping

Among the most divisive areas in American education is that of ability grouping. Increasingly, the premise of removing students from the mainstream of schooling and placing those students into homogeneous groups has come under fire. Nationally, the trend for students with disabilities has been to meet their specific needs within a program that, as much as possible, mainstreams these students into heterogeneous classes or into their least restrictive environment. This trend for heterogeneous groupings clearly has impacted gifted education.

In an analysis of current research utilizing meta-analytic techniques to evaluate findings on ability grouping, Kulik and Kulik (1987) reported that Slavin and Karweit (1984) found that "within-class grouping — in which students are assigned to different groups within a heterogeneous classroom according to aptitude or performance — is clearly beneficial for learners" (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, p. 22). Further, in a more recent study, "Slavin found that the evidence did not support the use of comprehensive, full day grouping of pupils into different classrooms on the basis of ability, but did support the use of within-class ability grouping...." (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, p. 22). Overall, Slavin concluded that ability grouping is maximally effective when it is done for only one or two subjects, with students remaining in heterogeneous classes most of the day; when it greatly reduces student heterogeneity in a specific skill; when group assignments are frequently reassessed; and when teachers vary the level and pace of instruction according to students' needs (Kulik & Kulik, 1987).

While most gifted educators agree that more research is necessary to better determine what is truly the best for able learners, the beauty of Slavin and Karweit's findings supporting within-class groupings in heterogeneous classrooms is that such a process bridges the equity/excellence dilemma. While educators are loathe to admit to political solutions to educational problems, the issue of ability grouping appears to be a compromise that can accommodate research findings. In the face of

current trends, within-class grouping can provide a process to meet the equity/excellence dichotomy during the shift of paradigms.

Organizational Strategies and Flexibility of Organizational Plans

Perhaps nowhere else in American education has the clash of paradigms been so obvious and intense as it has at the middle school level. The shift is from junior high school subject-oriented concepts to the more bridging middle school concepts, with individual emphasis accentuating the differences. The individual focus of middle level education is evident in the following recommendations: "The fundamental purpose of grouping learners should be to place them in settings that best meet their needs. For gaining many types of experience, heterogeneous groups present more natural and lifelike situations. In others homogeneous groupings may have some advantages. Neither completely heterogeneous nor homogeneous approaches deal responsively with the developmental variance among young adolescents" (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1989, p. 15).

The equity/excellence dilemma resurfaces. In reviewing what the experts have to say, on the one hand, homogeneous groupings for able learners are called for while, on the other hand, heterogeneous groupings are to be the rule. In fact, both are probably valid, except that the "preferred" system is placed above the individual learner instead of developing the system for the individual learners.

Equifinality means that there are many potential ways to reach resolution. Due to learner differences, varied techniques and processes are necessary to meet their needs. Focusing on heterogeneous v. homogeneous grouping results in a shift from the individual focus to the systems focus. It appears that the NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education recognized that dilemma: "Groupings should serve early adolescent developmental needs. Effective groupings depend to a large extent on adequate guidance in helping pupils select courses and co-curricular activities suited to their abilities and interests" (NASSP, 1989, pp. 15-16). Such a position was reflected by Schatz: "Our educational premise must be that of flexible pacing: the best education matches the pace of instruction with individual abilities, interests, to performance needs" (Schatz, 1989, p. 4). In effect, the individual student's need to achieve a quality education is based upon what that specific student needs.

A system based on the specific student is the antithesis of the industrial model. However, this individual focus is the wave of the future. Attempting to develop a specific organizational plan again endeavors to return us to the lock-step industrial model that focuses on the system rather than the individual. Schatz noted this problem: "The need to remove barriers and promote active learning is clear. Legitimate concerns exist, however, that in implementing new models, a 'lock-step' or 'one size fits all' curriculum may simply be reinvented" (Schatz, 1989, p. 1).

This view was further expanded in *The School of the Third Wave of Reforms: The Need to Go Beyond Current Structure:* "Flexibility to seek better ways and the commitment to evaluate one's efforts will be hallmarks of the third wave school. Institutional well-being cannot be mandated from outside, but the hope is it can be fostered from within. Changing mediocre educational systems into excellent ones necessitates policy transformation that is far more radical than accounting for absences, setting graduation requirements, logging instructional hours and taking competency tests. Can these more 'radical' changes take place while administrations and the public cling to an earlier vision of 'school'? The answer is no. The good

news is that a new vision of school is already taking shape and hopefully root as well" (Griswold, 1991, p. 10).

Equifinality enables us to know there are many paths to achieve a summit. For education, and especially for the education of the gifted and talented, the focus is on shifting to the individual learner and to the learners' teacher/facilitator. "An old adage states, in effect, 'If you want to change something, you must first understand it!' This insight includes understanding what seems to prevent something from changing" (Goodlad, 1989, p. 2).

Challenge to Gifted Program Educators

Educators of the gifted are in a position to lead American education into the new paradigm by embracing change and the future and by rejecting the restrictive structures of the past. Successful transition led and supported by educators of gifted and talented children will strengthen all of American education and increase opportunities for our most able learners. However, rejection of the emerging paradigm through focusing on narrow, backward-oriented issues could jeopardize much more than what is seen as simply gifted and talented education's future.

No one structure exists as a panacea for significant school reform and for the continued improvement in opportunities for gifted and talented students. Rather, each school must focus on its individual learners to develop programming that meets their needs. The new focus is on the quality of the individual, not on systematic uniformity.

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